

Sex Education Text a Hot Issue in Pregnancy-Prone Santa Ana

Trustees tonight will consider a curriculum that stresses abstinence over contraception.

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Citing Santa Ana's high teenage pregnancy rate, some parents and others in Orange County's largest school district are questioning a proposed health curriculum that pushes abstinence and barely mentions birth control.

The Santa Ana Unified School District Board of Trustees will meet tonight to consider adopting a health textbook that doesn't include information on contraception. The book would be supplemented in class by a set of lessons the board adopted this year on HIV/AIDS prevention, including information about condoms.

But some parents, such as Steve Delgadillo, say that's insufficient and plan to oppose adoption of the textbook at the board's meeting. He said two of his daughters became pregnant as 17-year-olds.

"It's good to have the AIDS and HIV [education], but that's not enough," he said. "I feel, as the parents of teenagers, and as a district, we have failed our children."

In 2000, the latest year for which statistics are available, there were 88.6 live births per 1,000 females ages 15 to 19 in Santa Ana. That's twice the national average.

Sex education in Santa Ana has historically been contentious. Two years ago, the school board narrowly rejected a health workbook that stressed marriage before sex and did not discuss contraceptives. Opponents said the book failed to provide teens with basic knowledge of alternatives to abstinence.

Nationally, school districts take varying approaches to the matter, with some teaching only abstinence and others providing a combination of abstinence and information on contraception.

Interest groups have already emerged in Santa Ana's latest debate. Planned Parenthood and the American Civil Liberties Union argue that the proposed curriculum doesn't comply with a recently approved state law requiring school districts that teach abstinence to also provide information on contraception.

"The textbook is horrible," said board member Sal Tinajero. "We have to arm our children, especially our young girls, so they can make adequate decisions and choices in life."

Tinajero said he would favor the textbook only if fellow board members agreed to buy supplemental material that focuses more broadly on birth control than the currently considered supplements do. He also said the district should consider requiring students to take the health course at a younger age. Right now, high school students can take the elective at any time.

Delgadillo's daughter Afton Tarin, 19, said she could have used a sex education class before her senior year, when she became pregnant with her daughter, now 20 months old. Contraceptive education, plus a

requirement that she take the class earlier, could have delayed her pregnancy, she said.

"It would obviously change people's lives if they would know about it sooner on in their school years," she said. "It's much more important than, say, Algebra II. Who uses that?"

Promoters of abstinence-only education argue that a curriculum covering both abstinence and birth control sends teens confusing signals.

"Contraceptive sex education assumes that young people will be sexually active, so it encourages young people to use contraception," said Bridget Maher, an analyst on marriage and family issues with the religiously based Family Research Council in Washington. "But this sends kids a mixed message. It says don't have sex, but use a condom if you need to. Young people need a clear message regarding abstinence."

School board member Rosemarie Avila, an ardent abstinence promoter, said schools should promote chastity until marriage.

"Children need to have a consistent message from adults: that marriage is to be honored and that's why you have sex," she said. "That's the message I would like to have all teachers give the kids. I know if someone has a daughter who's sleeping around all the time, you're worried about her health and her life, [but] there are other places they can get that information. From a school standpoint, you have to teach what's really best for kids."